

CATESBY AND COLLINSON

The first major treatise devoted entirely to the botany and zoology of the Americas was Mark Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, London: Printed at the Expence of the Author, 1731-1732. It became an extremely popular work, going through three major editions and several adaptations, including partial publication in the popular press—several of its plates appeared in reduced form in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, hand-colored and accompanied by a condensation of Catesby's text—and served as inspiration for a number of American successors, including William Bartram and Audubon.

Mark Catesby's two expeditions to North America (1710-1719 and 1722-1726), were officially approved but not financially supported by the Royal Society. The funding came from a number of private persons, mainly businessmen and scientific amateurs who were concerned with the increase of knowledge and commerce which could come from study of the resources of the Americas. One of the most generous of these private supporters was Peter Collinson, a London wholesale linen draper and amateur natural historian noted as the primary conduit of scientific information across the Atlantic. Collinson was the main backer of the publication, lending Catesby money at no interest and introducing him to American naturalists such as John Bartram from whom he was able to obtain specimens.

The expense of hiring a qualified engraver and commercial colorists was so great that Catesby learned to do this work himself. Subscribers (many of them members of the Royal Society, including Sir Hans Sloane, and owners of gardens to whom Catesby supplied seeds and seedlings of American plants) received the parts of the publication over a period of 18 years, from 1729 or 1730 to 1747 or 1748.

Catesby's original watercolors were apparently sold to the London dealer, Thomas Cadell, from whom they were bought in 1768 by the future George III for his notable collection of natural history watercolors. A selection of more than 50 of the 263 Catesby paintings is presently on loan by the Royal Library for an exhibition tour in North America where they are being shown at the Huntington Library and museums in Houston, Savannah, and Colonial Williamsburg.

"The Crested Titmouse, the Upright Honysuckle and the Little Yellow Star-Flower"

This is one of Catesby's original watercolors as shown in the catalogue of the Royal Library traveling exhibition, *Mark Catesby's Natural History of America: the watercolors from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle*, by Henrietta McBurney, Houston: the Museum of Fine Arts, in association with Merrell Holberton publishers London, 1997. KSRL: SC Ref Reserve D667

"*Alauda magna*, The large Lark [and] The little yellow Star-Flower"

Catesby frequently attempted to show his plants and animals in their natural environmental conjunction. The Little Yellow Star-Flower, originally drawn along with the Crested Titmouse and the Upright 'Honysuckle', is here shown with a bird which feeds upon its seeds.

This is plate 33 in Mark Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, London: Printed at the Expence of the Author, 1731. KSRL: Ellis Aves H1, vol. 1

Parus cristatus The crested Titmouse [and] The upright Honysuckle"

Toward the end of his description of the Upright 'Honysuckle', Catesby comments (in a rare mention of his patron, Collinson) that it "will endure our Climate in the open Air, having for some years past produc'd its beautiful

and fragrant Blossoms at Mr. *Bacon's* at *Hoxton*, at Mr. *Collinson's* at *Peckham*; and at Mr. *Christopher Grays*, at *Fullham*."

Note that the "Little Yellow Star-Flower", which appeared in the original watercolor, is not in this plate.

This is plate 57 in Mark Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, London: Printed for Charles Marsh, Thomas Wilcox, and Benjamin Stichall, 1754.

KSRL: Ellis Aves H2, vol. 1

Notes by Peter Collinson

This copy of the first colored figures of birds issued as separate plates was formerly owned by Peter Collinson (1694-1768), Catesby's patron. Collinson's annotations occur throughout, with short comments inserted in the plate key at the bottom of the page and lengthy text written on the verso of many plates. Usually found as a portfolio, this copy has been bound into a volume by Collinson or another former owner.

When Catesby (1683-1749) knew him, Collinson maintained a garden in Peckham (an area of large market gardens on the outskirts of London) in which many of Catesby's American plants were grown. He also formed a botanic garden at Mill Hill, Hendon, the home of his wife's family. His interest in natural history was partially a matter of business—he encouraged the cultivation of flax, hemp, silk, and wine in the American colonies— but mainly a lifelong avocation. His achievements in natural history brought him election to the Royal Society and he contributed a number of papers to its *Philosophical Transactions*.

Collinson had particularly close connections with American scientists, including Benjamin Franklin whom he advised on the establishment of a subscription library (presumably The Library Company of Philadelphia) and to whom he sent, in 1745, Franklin's first news of some new electrical experiments recently made in Germany. Collinson's news and the apparatus which he sent for

carrying out the experiments, led Franklin to duplicate and extend the enquiry.

Charles Collins, d.1744, [*Icones avium cum nominibus anglicis. Twelve engravings of British birds.* London: Printed for Thos. Bowles in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1736]

KSRL: Ellis Aves H7

Britannia in Kansas

an exhibition of materials from
the Kenneth Spencer Research Library
1997